



## New Sky Hopinka documentary puts viewers in position of powwow participants

The artist and film-maker's new feature, "Powwow People", highlights the very contemporary ways in which Indigenous traditions persist



Still from *Powwow People* (2025)  
Courtesy Crazy Eagle Media

"Put that in the documentary, Sky!" exclaims powwow emcee Ruben Littlehead as the Black Lodge Singers chant in rhythm with their drumbeat. "This is the one." *Powwow People* by Sky Hopinka, the Ho-Chunk and Pechanga artist, film-maker and MacArthur Fellow, is a straightforward vérité document of a powwow, but from within the powwow circle, blurring the line between director and subject. This is important, since much of the history of nonfiction film-making stretching back to its beginnings in the silent era—in travelogues and anthropological curios even preceding Robert Flaherty's staged *Nanook of the North* (1922)—took a deliberately ethnographic approach. *Powwow People* is educational, but it's also participatory.

Hopinka and his producers arranged the powwow on the grounds of Seattle's Daybreak Star Indian Cultural Center, inviting singers and dancers known across the powwow circuit for a representative showcase of the performance traditions that developed out of necessity following the forced resettlement of North America's Indigenous population. Held over three days in August of 2023, the powwow is condensed in the film into a single day, from morning preparations to a climactic dance competition at night.

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# Tanya Leighton



Still from *Powwow People* (2025)

Courtesy Crazy Eagle Media

Hopinka's short films and multi-channel installations have shown at museums and galleries, but *Powwow People* continues his practice in feature documentary following *maɬni - towards the ocean, towards the shore ↗* (2020), which mixed poetic and immersive nature photography and reflections on myth and the afterlife with portraits of the day-to-day lives of two Chinook people in the Pacific Northwest. As in *maɬni*, Hopinka is concerned with the logistics of tradition: the physical infrastructure and social networks that allow for continuation of Indigenous cultural practices such as the powwow.

The day begins with setup, as powwow organiser Gina Bluebird-Stacona rides the grounds in a golf cart; attendees and staff erect a teepee and check the sound system; flag bearers in full regalia enter in a processional; and performances begin with "Tiny Tots" in Day-Glo beads (including one child whose breastplate depicts Hello Kitty). Littlehead's patter, a constant in the film, keeps the events moving and involves the crowds with shoutouts to the Sacred Riders motorcycle gang providing security and powwow regulars enjoying themselves in their folding camp chairs; deadpan jokes about singers who sound like cats having kittens; and a waxing refrain of "Old ways...Old ways".

Operating a camera himself, Hopinka weaves in and out of the dance, racking focus between foreground and background, or, as in one of the film's formally impressive several-minute-long takes, taking a full lap around the outside of the powwow circle. Surveying the merch tents and food trucks, he looks back to the dancers and families filming them with iPhones, and the soundtrack dips in and out of the music to include reflections on inherited knowledge and the evolution of powwow from interviewees such as the late drummer Freddie Cozard and the nonbinary dancer Jamie John. Eventually, as the song concludes, he ends up back where he started.

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His 360-degree approach yields juxtapositions which speak to the context in which tradition persists: a wheeled duffel bag rolling along next to legs clad in fringed buckskin; mothers braiding daughters' hair in the parking lot. But as the night rolls in and the overhead lights come on, the camera becomes more immersed, culminating in a single take of 20-odd minutes covering seemingly the entirety of a men's traditional dance competition, capturing the banalities of community-festival admin and the transporting power of ritual as contestants in full feathered headdress and dancing bells are whittled down to semi-finalists, finalists and a winner as the camera moves in times to the drums. It's a sustained sequence of virtuoso film-making, apt for a film concerned above all with what it means for an identity to sustain itself.